



24th January 2021
The 3rd Sunday After Epiphany
Sermon – St James's Piccadilly
The Revd Dr Mariama Ifode-Blease
'Jesus is there; Jesus is here'

*May I speak in the name of the Triune God –
Father, Son and Holy Spirit.*

Is it ok to talk about joy in the dark tunnel of lockdown 3.0? I hope so, and I hope that you will forgive me focusing on the light of Easter, of April after months of long-term hibernation and hunkering down.

Over a decade ago now, I was invited to the Jewish wedding of friends in the United States. It was glorious. The chuppah gently swayed in the California sunshine and when we all shouted 'mazel tov' I could have sworn that the trees joined in. Although I only knew the bride's family, everyone welcomed me in, and complimented me on my accent (which I promised was real). We danced to Jewish folk tunes bare feet on the grass, in pure delight that these two people had found each other and that God was there. I long for the day when all can be wed in the church and when we, too, can mark this through dancing, knowing that love is recognised, love is celebrated, and love is lifted back to God.

Arriving into the story of the wedding at Cana in John chapter 2, we find ourselves at

a place of recognition, where fear meets awareness, and revelation meets understanding. Jesus and Jesus' mother Mary must have been aware of the shame running out of wine would bring on the family hosting this event, how the neighbourhood and Galilean-wide gossip-mill would go into overdrive. Mary, mother of God, may have felt afraid for the hosts when she went to her son to tell him "They have no wine". The threat of shame permeates the air as much as the anticipation of divine revelation.

John calls this a sign, one of the seven before Jesus' death and resurrection. Jesus's response is a bit odd. I must confess that I have often read His response as that of a reveller having way too much fun to care about the operational elements of mission. Jesus bristles, perhaps because His mother interrupts him in deep conversation and laughter, or perhaps because He knows that if he does something, anything, He will reveal something of himself that He is not yet ready to show the world. Jesus understands who He is, and what He can do. And so do his disciples later on. They

“believed in him” even though they will come to doubt Him in later chapters.

We are at a place of recognition, where fear meets awareness, and revelation meets understanding. Jesus circumvents the shame that could have been, and replaces that with a generous outpouring of love. The imperatives of purification are replaced by the abundance of mercy. Grace fills the room, the courtyard, the streets of Cana so much so that “when the steward tasted the water that had become wine, [he] did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew)”. Everything once again is transformed in the presence of Jesus, in the presence of God. This isn’t magic. This is amazing grace.

The words “they have no wine” symbolise the edges of despair that can be easily translated to our own lives and our society. We are encouraged to see wine not a luxury in this case, read in the context of the Ancient Near East but as ‘water’. It quenches and relieves thirst and offers some biological protection against the raging sun. They have no wine. We could read this as they have no way to support and sustain all of the people that have been invited to this celebration. It is not therefore really so much about Jesus being a reveller, though I have no doubt that he was, but rather it is about who Jesus is, as

Christ, and who He is in relation to our wants, our needs and our life story. Jesus stands with us when we are close to rock bottom, when we are faced with jars empty of hope and expectation. Jesus is there, when we are absolutely fed up with the absence of gathering, of coffee catch-ups and the gentle balm of a walk around a gallery. When we stand, and kneel and hunch over the loss of every cancelled meal, party, and wedding, we must believe that Jesus is there. Jesus is in our scarcity and in our abundance, in our sorrow and in our celebration, in lockdown challenges and in our joyful reunion when we meet again face-to-face.

Even though you have given me permission (I hope) to talk about joy, we also recognise that ‘hallelujahs’ do not have to be fluently uttered as in the Book of Revelation, chapter 19. Hallelujahs can be whispered, stuttered, broken. And in our ‘broken hallelujahs’ God invites us still to the “marriage supper of the Lamb.” The Book of Revelation speaks of the cosmic union of earth and heaven, of the Church and Jesus, the Risen Christ. All of which seems terribly unhelpful in the realities of an overburdened NHS, variants of this virus that plagues us, and the difficult periods overshadowing the day to day realities of our lives. Great God, I think, thanks for showing me the end times. But what about the now

times? And God, because our creator is used to being pestered by me, draws me back to the words “to her it has been granted to be clothed, with fine linen, bright and pure”. While the ‘her’ may be read by commentators as the Church here on earth, for me speaks equally loudly to the one-to-one relationship with our creator. The promise is there, that we have been granted something new, something that envelops, something that restores – love. It is the love of God evidenced in the “the righteous deeds of the saints” that wraps itself around us and keeps us whole when we feel like splintering. We are held, we are loved, and we are not alone. The dramatic revelation of who Jesus is at His baptism, and at the wedding at Cana reminds us that Jesus Christ can handle anything we through at Him, especially in a lockdown. We can trust Jesus, with the ups and downs of this lockdown exertion.

It has been hard to imagine this wedding scene at Cana during a week in which storm Christoph brought devastation to communities across the UK. If it were not the snowstorms, then it was the tragedy of homes being flooded and people being evacuated. And all this in the middle of a pandemic. My human understanding cannot make sense of how Epiphany can hold all of this, but I know that God can, and God does. I have found myself gazing out of

windows in deep thought, think about how people are coping and what they are leaning on, in order to get through. I have welcomed emails and letters from afar, from friends I don’t really deserve, who also remind me that I am not alone. It has been joyful to have our fellow pilgrims on Camino Companions and the wider St James’s family, as we walk through and on towards the light of Easter. I stared out of the kitchen window this week, lost in thought and I found myself staring at the two palm trees in our garden. I have no idea why there are palm trees in Wiltshire, or why they are in our garden of all places. But that was all I needed to remember the heat of a childhood in Lagos, Nigeria, the tiny beach that backed unto the playing area of our British primary school, our Russian powerhouse music teacher, who patiently waited for what seemed like forever for me to play at least one in-tune note on my recorder. Palms trees in Wiltshire. Unexpected, inexplicable, but infinitely delightful.

The Gospel according to the wedding at Cana is equally unexpected, inexplicable, but infinitely delightful. Who would have thought a community celebration would bring Jesus out of his messianic shell? The Gospel according to the wedding at Cana holds the central mystery of the incarnation and makes it real once again for us. It is

about being replenished in and by Jesus. It is about shame being prevented and its eventuality transformed. It is about God wanting us to know that we have already been promised “fine linen, bright and pure”.

Is it ok to talk about joy in the dark tunnel of lockdown 3.0? Yes, I believe it is. In the words of Pablo Neruda:

“Wine
stirs the spring, happiness
bursts through the earth like a plant,
walls crumble,
and rocky cliffs,
chasms close,
as song is born”¹

God waits for us at the table, with bread and abundant wine, and in the song and sunrise of the Easter morn. We know the journey there may be hard, especially this year and in the weeks ahead, but we will get there together. We are together and we will get there.

Amen.

¹ Trans, Margaret Sayers Peden, in the Selected Odes of Pablo Neruda (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), p.167.